

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Childhood Abuse, Assertiveness, and Date Rape:
Uncovering Precursors to Future Victimization

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Running head: Child Abuse, Assertiveness, and Date Rape

Abstract

One-hundred-seventy-one undergraduate females completed three questionnaires concerning childhood abuse, assertiveness, and date rape in an attempt to uncover precursors to recidivism of abuse. As predicted, significant positive correlations were found between child abuse before and after age 13. However, no significant correlation was found between childhood abuse and date rape. In examining lack of assertiveness as a precursor, the mean assertiveness scores of child abuse and date rape survivors after age 13 were lower than the overall mean; however, the combined score of those abused as children either before or after 13 and the score of those abused before 13 only were higher than the overall mean. Explanations for these inconsistencies in data include a "recovery and overcompensation" theory, differences in methodologies between the present and previous related studies, and the possibility that the assertiveness scale utilized may be invalid when used in the context of intimate inter-gender relationships.

Childhood Abuse, Assertiveness, and Date Rape:

Uncovering Precursors to Future Victimization

In a nationwide self-report survey of over 6,000 college students, Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski (1987) found that 53.7% of female undergraduates had been victims of some form of sexual victimization. Surveys of non-campus women have indicated rates of rape or attempted rape to range between 44% (Russell, 1984) and 14.5% (Kilpatrick, Best, Veronen, Amick, Villepontoux, & Ruff, 1985). (This variation in rates relates to the definitions used, the methods of collecting data, and possibly geographic locus of the surveys conducted.)

The FBI estimates that 45% of all arrests for rape are men under the age of 25, and the majority of the victims of sexual assault are between the ages of 16 and 24 years. Kanin and Parcell (1977) surveyed university female students and found that 83% had experienced offensive sexual advances by males. Ninety percent of the sexual assaults within this age group are classified as "acquaintance rapes," and Koss et al. (1987) found that, since the age of 14, 27.5% of the females surveyed had been victims of rape -- 47% of these offenses having been committed by first or casual dates, or romantic acquaintances. Yegidis (1986) found that approximately 10% of college females had experienced some form of forced sexual encounter by a date within the previous year, and 22% had been victimized at some time in their

lives. Similar findings and percentages have been reported over the past 20 years (Kanin, 1957; Wilson & Durrenberger, 1982; Shotland & Goodstein, 1983; Russell, 1984).

The majority of date rapes occur with only the threat of violence or verbal intimidation. Of the victimized college females in the Yegidis (1986) study, the most frequently used method of force encountered (59%) was verbal persuasions-protestations by the male to "go further" because of sexual need, arousal, or love. Similarly, studies of defense responses employed by potential rape victims have suggested that the women who resist most often use verbal responses and "match" the offender's use of verbal persuasion with their own verbal self-protective strategies (Amick & Calhoun, 1987).

Surveys of childhood abuse victimization have likewise demonstrated a high prevalence among college students. In a survey of 103 college students, Miller and Miller (1986) found that approximately one-third of the students studied reported a history of at least moderate child abuse, while 5 - 10% reported a history of severe abuse during their developmental years. In another study, Russell (1983) found that approximately 16% of women surveyed had experienced incest and 38% had been victims of some form of extrafamilial sexual abuse by the age of 18.

Long-term effects of childhood abuse (sexual or non-sexual) include guilt, fear, depression, poor social skills, isolation,

low self-esteem, and a generalized "damaged goods" syndrome (Alter-Reid, Gibbs, Lachenmeyer, Segal, & Massoth (1986); Browne & Finkelhor, 1986). Russell (1983) also found that women who had been sexually abused as children were more likely than non-victims to be victimized later in life.

The purpose of the present exploratory study was twofold: (a) to assess the incidence of childhood abuse (either sexual or non-sexual) and sexual victimization (by dates) among undergraduate females in an attempt to provide further evidence for recidivism of abuse among those victimized as children; and (b) to uncover possible differences on measures of assertiveness between victims and non-victims of childhood abuse, and victims and non-victims of sexual assault (e.g., fondling, oral sex, intercourse) by a date. Amick and Calhoun (1987) found that successful resisters to sexual assault showed more initiative, persistence, and leadership than unsuccessful resisters. Therefore, given the verbal defense strategies most used in a date rape situation, and the long-term personality effects of childhood abuse, it is proposed that college females that have previously been victims of child abuse will lack the "assertive" and confrontational characteristics necessary to resist sexual assault by a date.

Method

Subjects

One-hundred-seventy-one undergraduate females from

introductory psychology classes at a large Midwestern university participated in the study on a voluntary basis for extra course credit. The students ranged in age from 17 to 24, with an average age of 18.3, and represented the following racial backgrounds: 77% white, 15% black, 2% Hispanic, and 5% Other (e.g., Asian). Subjects were able to withdraw from the experiment at any time without penalty, but none chose to do so.

Materials

Three anonymous, self-administered questionnaires were administered: a 30-item Personal Inventory (actually the 1973 Rathus Assertiveness Schedule renamed to mask the variable measured); a Childhood History Questionnaire which documented child abuse experienced both before and after the age of 13; and a Survey of Inter-Gender Relationships using modified questions from (a) a date rape questionnaire (Yegidis, 1986) including questions about the type of sexual assault threat or experience encountered (e.g., fondling, oral sex, intercourse), the type of force experienced (e.g., verbal persuasion, threats of violence, injury), and the length of time the victim had dated the offender, and (b) the "National Survey of Inter-Gender Relationships" used by Koss et al. (1987), including questions about the social situation surrounding any sexual assault experiences (e.g., party, individual date), the types of resistance utilized by the victim (e.g., reasoning, telling

person to stop, physically struggling), and the effectiveness of the resistance (e.g., person stopped, no effect, person became more aggressive).

Procedure

After signing informed consent statements, subjects were given the packet of questionnaires to complete. Upon completion of the questionnaires, the students were given the experimenter's name and telephone number in the event they had questions or concerns regarding the study, and telephone numbers of the university's sexual assault crisis line and psychology clinic in the event participation in the experiment had inadvertently brought about any level of distress.

Results

Frequencies for experiences of childhood abuse, attempted sexual assault (of any kind) by a date, and completed sexual assault (of any kind) by a date are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Pearson correlations were computed to examine relationships between childhood abuse, subsequent victimization, and assertiveness.

Insert Table 2 about here

Recidivism of Abuse

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, only correlations of .3 or better were considered significant. As can be seen in Table 2, a significant positive correlation was found between child abuse before the age of 13 and child abuse after 13 ($r = +.51$, $p < .001$), but the correlations between childhood victimization and later sexual assault (of any kind) by a date failed to reach the minimum .3 criterion.

Abuse and Assertiveness

Table 3 lists the overall mean assertiveness score on the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule for all subjects, as well as the breakdown of mean scores when subjects were divided into groups by the type of victimization experienced.

Insert Table 3 about here

T-tests were computed to determine whether there were significant differences in assertiveness scores between (a) women who reported childhood abuse and those who did not, and (b) those who reported victimization of either attempted or completed date rape and those who did not report any date rape experience.

Insert Table 4 about here

As can be seen in Table 4, the differences in means for both t-tests were not statistically significant. Separate Pearson correlations were also computed between overall assertiveness scores and the incidence of both child abuse and sexual assault by a date; however, these also failed to meet the minimum .3 criterion of significance (see Table 2).

In keeping with the exploratory nature of this study, additional Pearson correlations were conducted for subjects reporting both childhood abuse and attempted or completed date rape to examine the use and effectiveness of defense strategies employed in a date rape situation (see Table 2). While the correlation between child abuse after age 13 and the extent of defense strategies used did not meet the .3 criterion, a significant positive relationship was found between childhood abuse before age 13 and defense strategies used ($r = +.43$, $p < .001$). Two negative correlations were found between experienced child abuse (at any age) and the effectiveness of defense strategies; however, these correlations failed to meet the .3 criterion.

Discussion

Nearly one-fourth of the subjects in this study (24%) reported a history of childhood abuse. This corresponds well with the rates reported in the 1986 Miller and Miller study (5 - 33%, depending on the type of abuse). The women in this study

also reported an incidence of sexual assault by a date (16%) consistent with past research (Koss et al., 1987; Yegidis, 1986).

Recidivism of Abuse

A significant positive correlation (+.51) was found between child abuse experienced both before and after the age of 13. This is likely due to the complex dynamics of the relationships involved in child abuse and the large majority of cases that go unreported and thus devoid of future intervention.

The lack of a significant correlation between subjects victimized as children and then again in date rape situations, however, is inconsistent with what was predicted, as well as Russell's 1983 findings. This discrepancy may be in the differences in methodologies used. Russell's study was conducted on a much larger scale (930 vs. 171 subjects). Also, Russell used extensive personal interviews rather than anonymous questionnaires to gather data, and this anonymity may have inadvertently generated less of a personal investment for the present study's participants to respond as accurately as possible.

Assertiveness and Abuse

Consistent with the study's hypothesis that survivors of childhood abuse are less assertive than those with no history of abuse, while not statistically significant, Table 3 illustrates that the mean assertiveness score for those abused after age 13

was lower than the overall mean (-2.16 vs. +2.47), and the mean scores of subjects who had either been victims of an attempted or experienced sexual assault by a date also moved in the predicted lower direction (+.51 and -1.92, respectively). However, the combined assertiveness score of childhood abuse survivors, either before or after the age of 13, was higher than the mean score for all 171 participants (+4.07 vs. +2.47), and the score for those abused as children prior to age 13 was +3.24. A number of possible explanations can be offered for this inconsistency in data. Assuming the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule is a valid measure of assertiveness in inter-gender relationships, subjects abused as children prior to the age of 13 may benefit from more of a "recovery time" than those abused as children after the age of 13, and may even engage in an "overcompensation" behavior, becoming more assertive than those never having experienced child abuse. This "recovery and overcompensation" theory could also explain the significant positive relationship found between child abuse prior to age 13 and date rape defense strategies used. However, this "recovery and overcompensation" theory falls short in the effectiveness of defense strategies utilized by survivors of child abuse. For both groups of child abuse survivors (before and after age 13), while not statistically significant, negative correlations were found between past childhood victimization and the ability to avoid later sexual assault by a date.

A crucial inconsistency in the assertiveness results was the higher (than the overall average) combined child abuse (before and after age 13) assertiveness score of +4.07 compared to the mixed findings of mean scores of those abused prior to age 13 (+3.24) and after 13 (-2.16). While the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule may provide a valid measure of assertiveness in relatively unthreatening situations, it is possible that the schedule does not tap into assertive (or nonassertive) behaviors when confronted with a seriously intimidative situation. Further, while the test may fairly accurately measure one's assertive or nonassertive behaviors in most encounters with strangers, peers, casual friends, etc., it does not contain questions pertaining to intimate inter-gender relationships and accompanying situations. Consistent with other empirical literature on inter-gender abuse (e.g., domestic violence), it is possible, therefore, that one could score high on Rathus' general assertive measure yet much lower on another assertiveness measure examining one's intimate inter-gender relationships.

In conclusion, in investigating relationships between childhood abuse, date rape victimization, and assertiveness, while some of the present study's data yielded results in the predicted directions of the study's hypotheses, much of the results were either statistically nonsignificant or inconsistent. Therefore, implications for further study include

(a) additional examination of these hypotheses utilizing more extensive methodologies (e.g., personal interviews or longitudinal studies following child abuse survivors), and (b) publication of an assertiveness measure that specifically examines assertiveness behaviors within intimate inter-gender relationships, and then utilizing this measure along with same or similar abuse questionnaires used in this study.

Even with valid research tools, however, throughout the investigation of such complex, sensitive, and extremely personal topics as childhood and date rape victimization, it is not surprising to find these discrepancies in data. In addition to the conscious and understandable withholding of information concerning one's victimization experiences, there remains the added enigma of the "unconscious" withholding of past unpleasant incidents, or even the, at times, necessary repression of these experiences altogether.

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Table 1

Frequencies and Relative Frequencies of Abuse Encountered Among
171 Subjects

Type	<u>n</u>	%
Child Abuse	41	.24
Attempted sexual assault by a date	59	.35
Experienced sexual assault by a date	28	.16

Table 2

Pearson Correlations Between Child Abuse, Subsequent
Victimization, and Assertiveness

Variable	x	Variable	n	r value
Child abuse before 13	x	Child abuse after 13	171	.51*
	x	Date rape-fondling	171	-.01
	x	Date rape-oral	171	-.04
	x	Date rape-intercourse	171	.09
	x	Date rape-other	171	-.08
	x	Combined date rape	171	.00
	x	No. of defense strategies used	59	.43*
	x	Effect of defense strategies used	59	-.22
	x	Assertiveness	171	.00
Child abuse after 13	x	Child abuse before 13	171	.51*
	x	Date rape-fondling	171	.19
	x	Date rape-oral	171	.05
	x	Date rape-intercourse	171	.15
	x	Date rape-other	171	-.02
	x	Combined date rape	171	.07

Table 2 (cont'd)

Pearson Correlations Between Child Abuse, Subsequent
Victimization, and Assertiveness

Variable	x	Variable	<u>n</u>	<u>r</u> value
Child abuse after 13	x	No. of defense strategies used	59	.28
	x	Effect of defense strategies used	59	-.15
	x	Assertiveness	171	-.11
Child abuse before and/or after 13	x	Date rape-fondling	171	.08
	x	Date rape-oral	171	-.00
	x	Date rape-intercourse	171	.13
	x	Date rape-other	171	-.06
	x	Combined date rape	171	.07
	x	No. of defense strategies used	59	.40*
	x	Effect of defense strategies used	59	-.15
	x	Assertiveness	171	-.05
Assertiveness	x	Child abuse before 13	171	.00
	x	Child abuse after 13	171	-.11

Table 2 (cont'd)

Pearson Correlations Between Child Abuse, Subsequent
Victimization, and Assertiveness

Variable	x	Variable	<u>n</u>	<u>r</u> value
Assertiveness	x	Child abuse before and/or after 13	171	-.05
	x	Date rape-fondling	171	.00
	x	Date rape-oral	171	.04
	x	Date rape-intercourse	171	-.09
	x	Date rape-other	171	.02
	x	Combined date rape	171	-.02
	x	No. of defense strategies used	59	-.03
	x	Effect of defense strategies used	59	.04

*p < .001.

Table 3

Mean Assertiveness Scores According to Type(s) of AbuseEncountered

Type of abuse	Mean assertiveness score
Overall (with or without abuse)	
(<u>n</u> = 171)	+2.47
Child abuse	
Before and/or after 13 (<u>n</u> = 41)	+4.07
Before 13 (<u>n</u> = 29)	+3.24
After 13 (<u>n</u> = 19)	-2.16
Sexual assault by a date	
Neither attempted nor experienced	
(<u>n</u> = 112)	+3.50
Attempted only (<u>n</u> = 59)	+ .51
Attempted and experienced (<u>n</u> = 28)	-1.92

Table 4

Group Comparisons of Assertiveness Scores

	<u>n</u>	Mean	<u>T-value</u>	
Test 1				
Victims of child abuse	41	4.07		
Non-victims	130	1.96	-.45	.66
Test 2				
Victims of attempted or completed date rape	59	3.50		
Non-victims	112	.51	.70	.48